

Night Terrors

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Satsuki has terrible nightmares that somehow Ragyo survived, and has returned to make her into a life-fiber hybrid.

Sometimes even the Steel Queen needs a hug from her little sister to get through the night.

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[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

Chapter 1

“My darling daughter...”

The words made Satsuki snap to consciousness, no intervening moments of drowsy contemplation, not a second afforded to orientate herself. She lay inert in her bed, immobile, senses wound taught like a spring, aware only of a single presence, malevolence condensed, in the room.

“Did you think I’d leave you behind?”

The voice, unmistakably her mother’s, was close now, so close to her ear that Satsuki should surely have felt Ragyo’s breath on her hair. The scent of her perfume, the same perfume that Satsuki had smelt on her pillow so many times, was suffocating, almost enough to make her gag. She flexed the muscles of her left arm, reaching instinctively for Bakuzan Gako in its resting place under the pillow next to her, and found her limb was bound tight, seemingly incapable of movement.

She realized, then, that the bindings were all around her. Legs and arms pinned tight to the bed, head held rigid, a band of material across her eyes. And just enough freedom round her neck that she could still speak.

“No... You’re gone, long gone from my life. We killed you, Matoi and I, severed your neck and left your orphaned head rolling in the gutters until the blood ran out and made a cape around you.”

As Satsuki spoke, she strained again at the bonds, tendons pulled tight until it seemed that with any more effort they would simply snap and leave her flailing like a broken doll on the bed.

The presence drew close:

“Are you sure you severed all the threads?”

No, it surely wasn't possible... Satsuki could remember with absolute clarity the two halves of the Rending Scissors coming together, she and Ryuko in perfect synchronicity, and the surprised look on her mother's face as her head had bounced free, coming to rest on its side and facing her body as it fountained in a bloody torrent. They'd burnt Ragyo's remains, then - Ryuko pouring can upon can of fuel from the Naked Sol's carrier deck over her until finally Tsumugu had passed his lighter to Satsuki, and in a single motion she'd struck and flicked it into shimmering lake. The life fibers had taken longer to burn than they had expected, and as they blackened and shrank, and a plume of choking black smoke had reached up until it was visible far from Honnou city, they pulled Ragyo's body into a fetal position, and that was the end of her - a pile of white ash, turned tight in upon itself.

"I'm guilty of neglecting you, Satsuki. When you wouldn't merge with the life fibers I put you out of my heart - but I've come back, because I know now what I did wrong. This time will be a success."

With horrible, restless inevitability, Satsuki felt the bindings start to move over her, sliding into her ears, eyes and mouth, life fibers wrapping round her legs like ivy, gliding up her thighs and down from her waist. She pulled again, willing her body to either break or to better her captor, chanting a mantra, over and over and over again:

"No, no, no, no, no, no..."

She felt the presence of her unseen mother again, resting on her chest, crushing the breath from her.

"Satsuki, my child: when you've given yourself over to the life fibers, we will become one together at last. Our bodies will twine around each other in endless union - we will become the vestments of a new god. Just you... and I... and your sister."

And at those two words, the little bolt of self-restraint, deep within her heart, sheared clean through, and the juggernaut of rage and loathing that it had held in check was set loose. Satsuki roared like

an animal, flexed her limbs beyond the point of human resistance, and with a crack like thunder, she heard the life fibers snap. She tore at the ones on her face, biting them, ripping them with fingernails, clearing her vision - grabbing to her left, she felt the angular hilt of Bakuzan and pulled it free and up above her.

"I'm going to kill you. Kill kill kill kill kill you. Kill you. Kill you."

She was screaming and chanting, arching her back, pushing herself up and off the bed. Satsuki felt her mother grab her by the wrists, but she pressed the attack, all semblance of sophisticated technique gone now, the red flash of life fibers near Ragyo's head an obvious target for her strikes.

"Hey! Hey! Kiryuin! It's me!!"

Satsuki drew in a full lung's worth of air and paused before her final attack. *Kiryuin* : the voice had addressed her as *Kiryuin* . She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and then looked again at the figure that was trying to hold her arms in place; and in the pale luminescence of the moonlight filtering through the curtains, the tableau changed: the hair was dark, unruly, nothing like her mother's, and the red that she'd taken to be life fibers was a red flash of hair scooping low over the girl's left eye. A small warren of cartoon rabbits watched her mutely from orange pajamas, disapproving all.

"Ma... toi?"

Satsuki felt the resistance leave her body, and she slumped in the bed. For a moment, Ryuko continued to hold her arms in place, unsure of whether another outburst was pending, but finally released them.

"You were screaming like crazy. Woke me up. Probably woke most of the mansion up too."

Ryuko paused for a moment, shuffled guiltily on the spot and looked at her feet.

"Uh, I had to bust the door to get in. Sorry. I'll fix it... pay for it..."

Satsuki looked across to the double doors; the wood round the lock was splintered outwards, pieces of the mechanism missing, a victim of some explosive force. She did her best to pull herself into some semblance of authority:

"You could just have asked Soroi for the key."

"It didn't really seem like the time for that. I mean, the noise you were making! I thought some sort of wild animal had got into the room."

Unwilling to lie, but equally uncertain of exposing a moment of weakness, even to her sister, Satsuki looked away for a moment.

"My wounds haven't healed entirely; it makes it difficult to sleep sometimes. Dreams..." she tailed off.

Ryuko looked at her and furrowed her brow imperceptibly. A few glib remarks came to mind, but she thought better of them - this time, at least.

"Yeah, yeah. I get those too. A recurring nightmare that my chest is open and someone is holding my heart in their hand."

She absent-mindedly pushed her hand inside her pajama top and felt along her sternum.

"It's kind of healed," she said to no one in particular, "but that cut you and Mako gave me still itches."

Satsuki looked at her with curiosity and a little surprise.

You really do stick up for the underdog, don't you, she thought. If I'd known I could just have asked you to help me and we would have saved so much confusion...

She placed Bakuzan down beside her and reached for the china cup at the bedside. The tea was cold, but the bitterness was familiar and

reassuring, and if the cup skittered slightly as she put it back on the saucer, her hands a little less certain than usual, Ryuko either didn't see, or chose not to remark on it.

"Hey, Satsuki... Did we do a terrible thing, in the end? To mother... our sister..."

As she mentioned Nui, memories surfaced in Ryuko's mind, like black rocks crashing through breakers. Nui Hajime, a strange, broken thing, like a marionette with its strings cut, Gamagoori pinning her arms tight as Mako - Mako of all people! - pressed the two halves of Bakuzan hard against her neck. And at the last, even through the haze and blood running into her eyes, Ryuko was sure she'd seen Nui's body go limp, a strange look of acquiescence on her face, and then the blades had come together, a last precision embrace.

Ryuko fidgeted with the waistband of the pajama bottoms, teasing fibers out from the cord.

"I don't think you could quite call her a sister." Satsuki advanced, unsure of whether introspection would improve or worsen the situation, "I think Mother made her entirely from her own DNA, so perhaps more like a clone than a sibling."

"You think?"

"So that just makes us matricides two times over." Satsuki finished somberly.

"We're a veritable Greek tragedy." Ryuko half smiled, mirthlessly.

Satsuki paused, raised the tea cup to her lips again.

"Just a moment..." Ryuko stopped the cup, halfway through its path, and reached forward. With surprising gentleness, she pulled a few loose strands of hair from the corner of Satsuki's mouth.

“That long hair must get everywhere”, she muttered, and Satsuki remembered the dream, the feeling of life fibers on her face, in her mouth, her ears. *Of course - a simple explanation . It might be as well to cut it, to make a clean break with the past.*

“There you go, Elektra.” Ryuko looked at her sister with a strange mixture of melancholy and kindness.

Satsuki felt a moment of surprise, and then a little sunburst of delight, at the comment.

“So you found the library then?”

“Yeah, yeah... sure. Soroi showed me.” Ryuko was suddenly acutely aware that she might be about to make a transition from edgy to bookish in her sister’s eyes.

“Lots of old books. Super musty. Just what I’d expect from you guys. *Lysistrata* was well thumbed though.”

Satsuki felt the blood suddenly rush to her face. She looked down, hoping that the half-light in the room wasn’t revealing.

“And a copy of *The Man'yōshū* too, with loads of the pages marked.” Ryuko was hitting her stride now, grinning broadly.

“*Better never to have met you in my dream, than to wake and reach for hands that are not there.*” she continued.

Satsuki tried to burrow deeper into the bed, hoping the mattress would open and swallow her up.

“I’m sure... that must have been father’s...” she managed to mutter.

“Really? It looked like the page corner was freshly turned over.”

Ryuko watched her sister carefully, wondering if she was pushing the point too far, thinking for a moment of Bakuzan Gako resting near Satsuki’s hand.

I ought to have worn Senketsu if was planning to give Satsuki a hard time. Just in case.

She relented for a moment, but Satsuki's excuse, weak though it was, had brought a question to the surface, something that had been troubling her for some days now. She ran her fingers through her hair, feeling the familiar tingle as they touched the life fibers in her fringe.

"Say, Satsuki... Do you think that dad ever really loved Ragyo?"

Satsuki paused for a moment, paused and remembered being held aloft, hands gentle and absolutely certain under her arms. Her father lifting her high into the air and spinning around in the hall of the mansion, spinning until the great wooden stairway and the exquisite furnishings became a blur. Satsuki remembered laughing, pulling at his great mop of hair, sticking chubby fingers in his face. He seemed to be at home so much those days; had he been doing any work at all back then?

"Somehow, I don't think he was an overly ambitious man. So if he married her, it must have been for love, not money or power." she said.

Satsuki looked down at the bed again, hoping it would be taken as embarrassment at the previous line of questioning. Hoping against hope that Ryuko wouldn't press the matter further, and thinking of the album she'd found in a dusty box room in the far attics of the mansion, photos of a young woman scarcely older than she was, fair hair almost white, and only white, smiling with genuine warmth as she leant against the frame of an old shop. Kyoto perhaps, or might it have been Nara?

The wind roared in the mouth of the fireplace, shaking the logs in the embers, the branches of the tall katsura outside Satsuki's room tapped insistently at the window, and at the thought of her mother, Satsuki again felt the presence in her bedchamber. The room began to turn about her, all the while a high-pitched ringing in her ears, and

it was all she could do to grasp the delicate handle of the tea cup tighter, tighter, to stop herself from blacking out.

“Satsuki?” she heard Ryuko say, almost at the edge of audibility.

She opened her eyes to Ryuko and felt the gentle pressure of her sister’s hand around her own. Satsuki managed a wan smile when she saw the rabbit print pajamas again, the sleeves tight around her sister’s muscular arms, midriff exposed, an appealing juxtaposition of athleticism and childish naivety.

“Don’t you think Mankanshoku will be wanting those back?” she asked.

Ryuko half smirked and, letting go of Satsuki’s hand, smoothed the pajamas around her upper arms.

“Mebbe... but I get the feeling that she might be wanting something a little more *nuptial* in the near future.” and she gave Satsuki a conspiratorial wink.

It hadn’t passed unnoticed, if still unremarked by either of them, that Gamagoori had taken to collecting Mako in his car each morning, delivering her with rigorous punctuality to the academy in time for the first class of the day; then, in the evening, he would drive her home, dining with the Mankanshokus before helping her with homework, or so they assumed. And on at least one occasion when Ryuko, in the small hours of the morning, had taken a mountain bike from the mansion’s cavernous garage and had biked down to what had been the no-star district, she had found Gamagoori’s car still there, neatly parked outside the back alley clinic. *That* was something she hadn’t yet told Satsuki. They were all friends now, of course, but it didn’t hurt to have something on the big lug, just in case.

“Those crazy kids.” Ryuko continued, “It’s good that they found each other.”

“Even the strongest foundation needs a support to rest upon.” said Satsuki, and she relaxed, the shift in conversation moving her closer to equanimity, normality. “But to my previous point, you should find something more your size in the cabinet by the mirror.”

“Thanks...” Ryuko wandered over to a large antique dresser and tugged at the handles.

“Not the top drawer...” Satsuki started, but it was too late. The drawer was open, and Ryuko’s hands were rummaging inside, displacing its contents.

“Hey, Satsuki! What’s with all these old clothes?”

Ryuko turned, holding a child’s dress up to her chest. Simple, elegant, plain white cotton with a red bow at the neck, it must have belonged to a child of six, perhaps seven, years old.

“Was this yours? It’s so cute! I never would have guessed.”

Still holding it to her chest, Ryuko began to spin, dancing a waltz while calling to her sister.

“Satsuki-chan, Satsuki-chan! Such a cute little girl!”

The embarrassed silence that was rolling in waves from the bed just caused Ryuko to giggle uncontrollably.

“It’s sweet and all that, but why did you hold onto all this old stuff?” she asked, pirouetting next to the cabinet.

“I... I...” the stammer was completely uncharacteristic, but Ryuko was too giddy to care.

“I... kept the things I thought my sister would have liked to wear!”

It was a shout, almost a cry. Ryuko stopped, mid-turn, and faced the cabinet. Had Satsuki’s voice cracked for a moment, as she spoke? Ryuko couldn’t be sure. She looked back over her shoulder at the

bed: Satsuki was looking down and to the side, her hair falling across her face and making her expression unreadable.

Ryuko looked back at the cabinet, at the children's clothes arrayed, and now disarrayed, in the top drawer. *I'm such an idiot*, she thought.

"You weren't wrong." she said, quietly. Then, with painstaking dexterity, she refolded the dress, crease upon crease, before tidying the drawer's contents and replacing it, smoothing it down carefully and sliding the drawer closed with a satisfying thud.

"Try the bottom drawer." Satsuki's voice was muted.

Ryuko crouched and pulled open the drawer. Inside the aged mahogany, she was surprised to find a selection of modern, even stylish clothes: a pair of skinny jeans that it was a stretch to imagine Satsuki in, a baggy cashmere jumper that Ryuko made a mental note to claim later, and there, in the far back corner, lightly shimmering in the moonlight, a classical nightdress, the twin of the one Satsuki habitually wore.

Ryuko pulled it out and held it to her shoulders, letting the full length unfold to the floor. It was slightly too long, by about the same as the difference in height that separated her from her sister, but otherwise the fit seemed good, Satsuki having exercised some uncanny foresight. And the fabric - it was so fine that it was almost translucent, and so soft as to be almost frictionless. For a moment Ryuko wondered: might it be some advanced material, a product of Revocs' research labs?

"How about this?" she dared a glance back at Satsuki, and was relieved to see her sister watching her again.

"A good choice. I might even believe we're related after all."

Ryuko rubbed the fabric between her fingers, marveling at the sensation.

"And no life fibers?" she asked.

"I made a point of it. It is pure silk - hand-made. There aren't so many examples of that now, thanks to Mother."

Ryuko shot a worried glance towards the bed - probing whether Satsuki's mood was darkening again. Distraction was perhaps the better part of valor in this case, and she turned towards the mirror, preparing to slip the nightdress on.

"Just let me give it a try..."

Satsuki watched as Ryuko unbuttoned the comically tight pajama top, tossing it over the back of a Louis XIV chair near the bedroom window. High winds were driving clouds across the face of the moon, the light in the room fluctuating in sympathy, but even so Satsuki could see the faint tracery of scars across Ryuko's back: a network like the canals of Mars glimpsed through a terrestrial telescope. Each one would have been sufficient to kill a normal human, but on her sister's back they were already fading to nothingness, mere echoes of wounds, and so very different from the few scars that Satsuki herself had become home to during the conflict.

With her back still to Satsuki, Ryuko slipped the pajama trousers down, and with a light kick, deftly flicked them, too, onto the chair. Standing naked by the cabinet, the moonlight - white, almost halogen white - picked out every muscle in stark relief: her back, her buttocks, her thighs. Her skin was pale as alabaster, and as she raised the nightgown over her head, Ryuko was, for a moment, a Renaissance statue of an ancient warrior princess, at once both beautiful and terrifying.

"Tsuki-hime..." Satsuki murmured.

"I'm sorry?" Ryuko looked back over her shoulder at the bed, forcing Satsuki to look away and suddenly feign interest in the exact pattern of the folds in the sheets. She stayed that way, eyes averted, until the sibilant descent of the gown indicated that it was appropriate to

look up again. Ryuko made a quick twirl, the hem flying outwards like an opening flower. The pirouette was perfectly controlled, and utterly graceless, like a boxer performing ballet, and Satsuki felt her heart warm slightly at the sight.

"How do I look?" Ryuko asked.

"Almost like a real Kiryuin." Satsuki jibed back.

She smiled: the gown really did look good on Ryuko. Somehow she had known, just as she always had, the things it was right to keep. Impossible clothing that was never worn, never was to be worn, never would be worn, until now.

Ryuko stopped spinning and grinned at her.

"That bad, huh?"

Ryuko studied her sister for a moment, probing a little with the strange augmented senses that the life fibers afforded her. The older girl seemed calm now, back to her usual self. The distraction of the nightdress had done its work - a job well done. And if it had resulted in some better-fitting night-wear, well, that was only an additional bonus.

"Listen, Satsuki, I'd better get back to bed. School night, y'know? And they tell me the Student Council President is a real ball-breaker about punctuality."

Satsuki narrowed her eyes slightly, but continued smiling.

"So I am reliably informed."

Ryuko began to wander back towards the double doors, but as she did so, Satsuki felt the room become a little more cavernous, less familiar, the shadows from the trees outside taking on the aspect of hands, claws, clutching at her under the bedclothes. She shuddered a little, remembering the feeling of fibers flowing over her legs.

“Ryuko...”

The figure in white stopped by the door for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” Satsuki continued, “we used so little of the mansion these last few years. Your room must be very cold. I imagine the windows don’t even close properly.”

Satsuki wasn’t wrong. When Ryuko had arrived at the mansion, Soroi had shown her to the room opposite Satsuki’s and, with a slight pause as he unlocked it, had said simply, sadly, “This was your room, Lady Ryuko.”

The room, the mirror image of Satsuki’s, seemed at first glance to stretch back to the limit of visibility, and Ryuko had thought for a moment that the Mankanshoku’s entire clinic would fit several times over within it. It was bare though, and unwelcoming, a patina of dust across the floor and windowsills, and naked bulbs in the light fittings. The only furnishing was a huge four-poster bed against the back wall, but in the far corner a pattern of four circular marks in the dust suggested that another, much smaller, bed had been there until recently. The walls were bare plaster, rough with age though surely not as old as the mansion itself, but one was half painted, solid color giving way to a ragged edge as if it had been abandoned mid-stroke. Ryuko had run her fingers along the boundary line, feeling the smooth paint give way to dusty plaster, and had wondered whether, like her, this was her father’s handiwork.

The bed, the bed though was Leviathan, matched in size to the expanse of the room. Tall though she was, Ryuko still had to climb onto it, and the mattress was surely large enough to accommodate an entire family. There’d been no sheets or covers and it had seemed like a cold night was in the offering until, responding to some unspoken command or merely exercising some supernatural butler’s ability, Soroi had appeared, bearing a huge stack of blankets. And it was within these that Ryuko had burrowed, carving out a warm burrow until Satsuki’s shouts had awoken her.

"There's a draught, but nothing I can't handle." she said, and grinned goofily, "After all, I've been running around half naked for the past few weeks."

"Even so... I can make space for you here, if you wish."

It was perhaps the last thing Ryuko would have expected Satsuki to say. Her uncertainty was unnerving, and to ask that question... who or what must have visited her in her dream, to leave her so rattled? *It was only a dream. It was only a dream.* She remembered the haiku she had written as a child in a rare burst of literary creativity:

Crying, she awoke

It had only been a dream

But her heart still ached

In truth, dreams had held a special terror for Ryuko too, since long before she had discovered her sister. Now, after what she had experienced... She would sometimes see Ragyo cradling her heart in her hand, and then be shocked awake as her mother drove long fingers into it, bursting it like a ripe fruit. And still, and still, that was not the worst of it. The recurring dream that caused her to wake, drenched in sweat, was that she was once again trapped inside Junketsu. She would see Satsuki, fallen, before her, and Mako's desperate flight to intervene. But in the dream Mako was a moment too late - Ryuko would see herself raise the Scissorblade, and then drive it down into Satsuki's chest, the hot spray of blood across her face catapulting her to wakefulness. The first time she'd woken from that dream, she'd been physically sick, stumbling her way to the back alley clinic's small bathroom just in time, and heaving over the bowl until her stomach cramped and her eyes were streaming. The rest of the night had been spent clutching onto Mako who, with customary good grace, had simply held her back and never questioned her or raised the matter again. No, Ryuko would be the last person to tell her sister that dreams were something easily to be ignored.

I can make space for you here, if you wish. No sooner had Satsuki uttered the words than she regretted them. The customary horrors of “Asking someone out” were as incomprehensible to her as hieroglyphs written in imperishable metal, discovered on some distant planet, the time and effort the other students at the academy spent on such things impenetrable, unfathomable. What terrors could lie within a simple solicitation for social interaction, to see a movie or meet for a meal? Could it be any worse than waking, knowing that you might not live to the end of the day, that your failure might drag your friends down into the abyss with you?

Yet, as Ryuko stood at the door, and Satsuki awaited her response, she felt unfamiliar fears surface: fear of rejection, fear of ridicule. The fears she’d seen written time and again in the notebooks of her contemporaries:

A-kun smiled at me in homeroom today. Will he invite me out this weekend?

B-chan was talking with her friends when I passed and she didn’t even look at me. Have I been forgotten already?

Had she been too forward? It wasn’t unusual for siblings to share a bed, was it? Particularly in the poorer districts of Honnou where whole families were pressed together in spaces smaller than this single room. Did Ryuko suspect some hidden motive? Satsuki felt her stomach knot under the weight of unprompted questions. *I’ve only just found her, and now I’ve driven a wedge between us.*

It takes Uranus more than 84 years to orbit Sol, while Neptune completes its traversal in a leisurely 165 years: in Satsuki’s frame of reference it seemed to take only slightly longer than that for Ryuko to turn towards her and strike a nonchalant pose, resting on the door frame.

“Well, scoot across then,” Ryuko instructed, “it’d be a crime to have a bed this big and not make use of it.”

Words were beginning to tumble out of Satsuki's mouth, a half-voiced protestation that she always slept on that side of the bed, but it was too late. Ryuko was already by her side, chanting "Move, move" and flapping her hands as though she was trying to herd cats. With little alternative, and wishing to avoid the ignominy of being picked up and forcibly thrown across the bed, Satsuki slipped Bakuzan under the far pillows, and then shifted herself across to the other side, tucking herself in so that only her head was visible above the covers.

Ryuko hauled herself into the space vacated by her sister. The sheets were crisp, white cotton, starched like fresh hotel bedding, and the combination with the warmth of where Satsuki had lain a moment before was thoroughly enticing. Ryuko relaxed into the bed, letting her head sink into the cradling bowl of the pillow. She was sufficiently tired that drifting to sleep appeared to be a mere formality, but there was a strange nervousness coming from the other side of the bed that made it impossible to relax. Ryuko was no stranger to sharing sleeping arrangements, having topped-and-tailed with strangers and friends alike after many a rowdy party, and crashing with someone on a sofa had been historically unproblematic. Even the snoring of the combined Mankanshoku family, which would regularly set up resonances that caused the entire clinic to shudder, and books to leap for freedom from their shelves, had been unable to bar her passage into sleep. But Satsuki... Satsuki was different. Ryuko could feel the energy coming off her, all high frequencies and sharp edges, a world away from the smooth glow she typically felt from Mako while she was sleeping.

Finally, after what seemed an endless round of shifting, rolling and turning the pillow, Ryuko sensed Satsuki's heartbeat slow, her breath become calm, and it seemed that she too would be able to settle herself to sleep. However, as she felt night's soft caresses wrap around her, Satsuki's body jerked with a sudden violent spasm, a muffled cry that was strangely close to "Mother", and a leg shot out, the heel cracking Ryuko sharply across the shin.

"Hey!"

Satsuki rolled to face her sister, her face momentarily clouded by confusion as to where she was, and the identity of the person beside her.

"Sorry... I was certain I was somewhere else..." Satsuki furrowed her brow for a moment, trying to disentangle the present from memories of running through the corridors of Honnoji Academy, cutting down human-form COVERS at every turn.

"You're a lousy bed-mate, you know that? Didn't you ever have sleepovers when you were a kid?"

Satsuki rolled back again, running pale slim fingers through her long black hair, and looked up at the ceiling. For a moment she flicked through the mental filing cabinets she used to classify her memories, trying to stay well away from those that had been taped or bolted fast.

"Nonon would sometimes stay over, but I put a stop to that after a while."

"Heh heh... so you worked out she's a pain in the ass too." Ryuko grinned triumphantly - that would be something to needle Nonon with tomorrow.

Satsuki felt one of the sealed drawers begin to open, its mechanism subtly interlinked with the memory she had just recalled.

"I began to have... concerns... about her safety in the mansion."

Ryuko mentally kicked herself, digging the nail of her middle finger hard into her palm out of frustration. There was a rocky coastline to private conversations with Satsuki, full of jagged reefs and treacherous shallows, and the brittle hulks of many a careless phrase or poorly chosen question had come to decorate it. As time passed, however, Ryuko had begun to get the measure of it, to map

its hidden currents and steer clear of the most dangerous tides. One day, she was sure, Satsuki would tell her the name of the dread island, but until then she would keep both their boats moored in safer waters, or try to, at least. Lacking a better resource, she grabbed hold of “Nonon”, pivoting about the topic to swing herself and Satsuki both out of the pull of the previous conversation.

“That little creep doesn’t deserve to have you looking out for her.”

“Funnily enough, she said exactly the same thing about you.” There was the faintest trace of a smile on Satsuki’s lips that caused Ryuko to relax slightly.

So she talks about me? The words were beginning to form before caution, driven either by the life fibers or some instinctive animal brain, kicked in and transmuted the question into a statement that Ryuko later realized was almost comically *tsundere* :

“Hmmph... Not like I care what she thinks about me.”

“Of course, Ryuko: there’s absolutely no reason whatsoever for you to care what Nonon thinks about you.”

She was doing it again. What Ryuko had classified as that “Zen Bullshit” thing, that made it impossible for her to read Satsuki’s emotional state, even with her life fiber senses turned up to the max. It was inevitable, really, that Satsuki could mask her emotions so completely when she chose, a skill she must have refined over more than a decade in order to hide her plans from Ragyo, but it still rankled that her sister could appear so opaque when it suited her, while Ryuko’s own thoughts were all too often transparent. That was down to something more than just the one year that separated them.

Still... if Satsuki was pulling that crap again with her, perhaps she’d mentally put her house back in order. One thing still could be done, though, she thought, one thing that she could get away with that none of the others could.

“So... big spoon or little spoon?”

“I beg your pardon?” Satsuki was genuinely confused, and that fact in itself raised a little cheer from inner-Ryuko.

“Big spoon it is then.” and Ryuko rolled quickly towards her sister, grabbing her distant hand, and then rolled back, pulling Satsuki with her. She could feel an explosive complaint about the close physical contact begin to take shape, but she held fast onto Satsuki’s hand, pressing it tight to her own chest so that it amplified the slow thumping of her heart.

“You know,” Ryuko began, hoping to take initiative with the conversation, “when I was little I used to get terrible nightmares: dreams of endless falling. They were almost unbearable. I became terrified to go to bed.”

She pressed her back against Satsuki, and through the gossamer barriers of the nightdresses, she could feel her sister’s heartbeat, now rapid, a response to the surprise of the situation, but gradually slowing and falling into cadence with her own.

“There was a girl,” she continued, “a girl some years older than me, maybe a teenager while I was still in kindergarten, who used to help Dad, help Isshin, in the lab. And sometimes, if he was away, she’d babysit me. When I couldn’t sleep she’d lie next to me, just as you are, and hold my hand and feel my heart beating, and we’d be safe, just the two of us, and the fear would leave me. But you’re the eldest, so you have to take her place now, ‘kay?”

Satsuki felt hot tears building behind her eyelids, but she squeezed them shut, squeezing Ryuko’s hand, and almost inaudibly murmured, “Okay.”

They stayed that way, perfectly connected, one to the other, until both began to relax. Ryuko felt them both synchronize, their breathing, their heartbeats, a strange analogue of wearing a kamui. They were floating away together on a raft upon dark waters, but the

trees on the banks of the river were cherry blossoms, and the still water reflected a full moon and the constellations in precise detail, and there was nothing to fear.

“Goodnight, Ryuko.” the words were little more than breath on the back of her neck.

“Night, Sis...”

Ryuko’s voice was quiet, and very far away, and truthfully Satsuki almost didn’t hear it at all, but with her face buried in her sister’s hair, breathing in the still-present scent of home-made croquettes and cheap shampoo, there was the smallest, smallest look of contentment on her face as she finally drifted into sleep.

Neither of them dreamt any further that night.
